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Creating future proof graduates

Celia Popovic and Carmen Tomas

Background

Birmingham City University's NTFS project, 'Creating future proof graduates', began in July 2007. The core team comprised two National Teaching Fellows (Professor Anne Hill and Dr Nick Morton) and three members of the Centre for the Enhancement of Learning and Teaching (Dr Celia Popovic, Ruth Lawton and Jenny Eland). In September we were joined by a research assistant: Carmen Tomas, the project's only full-time member.

The project aims to provide resources to develop students' ability to function effectively in the workplace, by complementing formal university education with employability skills. By drawing on research with employers, staff and students we are creating a series of 'critical incidents' which bring to life the sometimes dry lists of employability skills. These critical incidents mirror authentic workplace situations.

The core project team has led the production of the resources, but in the context of a much wider group of participants which has included employers and colleagues across our own University and in partner institutions both in HE and FE, as well as current students and alumni.

Skills gaps

Our starting point was to interview employers. The literature on skills gaps at a national level provides a broad picture of the main areas for concern in workforce training (Leitch, 2006). Besides the basic skills (numeracy, literacy and ICT), a number of large scale surveys have addressed other skills that are valued by employers. A briefing from the Institute of Directors (2007) identifies the following skills as the most important along with the basics:

- people-related skills: communication skills; team working; meeting deadlines
- personal skills and attributes: honesty and integrity; reliability; hardworking and good work ethic; positive can-do attitude; punctuality.

A report from the Council for Industry and Higher Education (Archer and Davison, 2008) presents yet another set:

- thinking and conceptualising: intellectual ability; planning and organisational skills; analysis and decision-making skills.

Using these as the basis, we interviewed employers and graduates to get an insight into which are considered the most important. Our interviews were also aimed at eliciting real situations experienced by employers and graduates to complement the abstract concepts with real examples.

The following are skills that employers in a range of sectors perceive as difficult to develop:

- Housing: organisational culture and societal factors; help-seeking; communication skills and providing relevant answers
- Music: networking (perceived by both graduates and employers as crucial); understanding the sector and its 'unstructured' nature as a profession
- Law: commercial awareness; finding practical solutions to problems.

We also talked to a number of graduates about their views of the most important skills that they had to develop once they reached the workplace. There were some clear overlaps with the employers' views, but these were the key issues for the graduates:

- literacy: writing for diverse audiences (non-academic)
- personal attributes: developing assertiveness (how to say 'no')
- people-related skills
- networking: Music, Marketing and Housing graduates agreed that this is one of the most important skills to develop soon after leaving university
- dealing with difficult situations and recognising what to do when a theoretical model fails
- career-related: finding out what you do not want to do; understanding the profession; knowing how to go about finding information.

Learning resources

We now have eight critical incidents under development which have emerged from a consideration of the research findings. We have used different approaches for each incident but in each case have aimed to produce a resource that is embedded in a particular discipline or disciplines, but which can easily be adapted for use in another.

Too Much Information

This resource addresses a skill that is unanimously accepted as being slow to develop by recent

graduates, particularly for roles that involve interaction with clients. It illustrates the importance of providing relevant answers and responding to clients' needs, rather than saying everything that they know about a subject, which may have been a useful tactic when undertaking assessments during their courses. By means of cartoons and sound files, students are presented with a similar situation in several different contexts, including web design, housing, radiography and education.

Stone Soup

Uses techniques of storytelling to help students to appreciate the value of team-working. Many students are taught in a competitive context, but many employers value employees who can work together to the benefit of the organisation as a whole. *Stone Soup* is a cartoon which reworks the Grimm Brothers' tale of the same name (a fable about co-operation in a time of scarcity) in a modern context and is used in a session where the students start by hearing and watching the story, then create stories of their own – working together, of course.

No Offence Meant

Uses the real incident of a teacher in Sudan, who inadvertently caused immense offence by naming a soft toy 'Mohammed', to help students to explore issues of cultural difference and sensitivity. Students are presented with a range of web-based resources including quizzes and games to help them to develop their awareness of the issues involved when moving from one culture to another.

Ethical Dilemma

Addresses the skill of effectively seeking help and making prompt decisions in the workplace. It illustrates the thorny issue of what to do if you suspect that a fellow employee is doing something wrong, but you are not sure. Through the use of video, students are invited to play the part of a recent graduate who finds herself or himself in such a position. They first watch the incident, as though they are taking part, then listen to advice from a range of sources including best friend, fellow worker and trade union representative, before being asked to decide what action they would take.

Networking

Addresses a need, recognised by graduates, to

develop their networking skills after leaving university. Ludo meets Trivial Pursuits in this imaginative and interactive game which helps students to explore the many networking opportunities that can present themselves and might require prompt decisions and reactions to seize them.

Inappropriate Behaviour

In the environment of an orchestra, a theatre and a university, students are encouraged to examine an incident of inappropriate behaviour by someone in a senior position, to determine whether this is bullying and how they might react were they in such a position. This scenario makes use of role play and group work to help students to explore the tensions and options involved.

Expecting the Unexpected

Responds to the discovery by recent graduates that when they left university the theories did not always apply to real life. The skill of dealing with extreme and unexpected emotions, particularly in strangers, is explored in this scenario. It presents a series of unexpected emotional reactions such as being extremely upset or angry. Skilled actors create situations that students can use to rehearse how they might respond so that they are better equipped to deal with a similar situation should it occur in the workplace.

Who, What, Where...

Aims to equip students with the skills of research vital in modern society, as it examines a scenario where a graduate fails to deal appropriately with a client through a lack of knowledge which could have been met had they used the correct research tools. This can be applied to preparation for a job interview, or in many work situations.

Evaluation

We are taking a three-pronged approach to evaluation by reflecting on the experience of the team; the project process; and finally the resources themselves. The initial phase involved commissioning an external consultant to enable us to reflect on team performance and the hopes, fears and wishes that each team member brought to the project. This was extremely useful in enabling us to recognise a few tensions and concerns and to address them in a supportive and positive manner.

The team evaluation is ongoing. The evaluation of the project takes this approach a little wider, and will enable us to report on the experience of taking part in an NTFS project. We anticipate that this will help inform our response to future projects and may be of help to others. Finally, the evaluation of the resources is key, as we need to be sure that they meet the intended aims by improving graduates' employability and ultimately their ability to be 'future-proof' in an ever-changing world.

As the project develops we are seeking opportunities to share our progress with the HE community. We plan to provide a complete set of the resources with teaching notes and contextual information to every HEI in the UK. We will launch this at Birmingham Council House in December 2009, when we will invite all NTFS project teams to share their practice and progress. We will also extend an open invitation to the HE community and employers to view and try out our resources.

References

Archer, D. and Davison, J. (2008) *Graduate employability: What do employers think and want?* London: Council for Industry and Higher Education.

Institute of Directors (2007) *Institute of Directors skills briefing: Graduates' employability skills*. Available at: www.iod.com [Accessed September 2008].

Leitch (2006) *Prosperity for all in the global economy – world class skills*. London: HMSO.

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We are actively seeking collaborators from across the HE sector at any level and in any discipline to try out and evaluate the resources. For more information please go to: www.bcu.ac.uk/futureproof.